

# Nothing in the Dark

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Summary: Dan contemplates life, death, and future career options.

## Nothing in the Dark

A motivational poster hangs on the wall behind the guidance counselor's desk, featuring a picture of a young child playing in a fountain. It bears the caption: "Priorities- a hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove...but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child."

Glancing at his counselor, who's rambling about "goals for the future," Dan wonders if it would be possible to wrangle permission to attend a series of leadership conferences in New York City. He's received an official invitation that offers all expenses paid. The only catch is that he would have to be gone for two weeks of school during February. Maybe he could use "it's for the children" as an excuse to get a change of scenery for a few weeks.

". . . so, what are you thinking about in terms of a career? Are you making any plans at the moment . . ." The guidance counselor pauses to check his name. "Daniel?"

Dan stares at her quizzically, and not because she obviously doesn't know his name. He doesn't know hers, either. Truthfully, he has little faith in the guidance department, especially since they gave him half senior classes and half sophomore classes for both semesters of this year. No idea how that miscommunication would have occurred- he's a sophomore in high school, and he's never switched or missed a grade.

"I haven't really given it much thought," Dan replies honestly. This conversation is really the first time where someone has pointed out that it might be a tad unrealistic to expect to do the whole Thoreau

cabin-in-the-woods thing for the rest of his life.

"Well," his guidance counselor says with an overly bright smile, "What did the results from the career guide website say?"

Dan glances at the list in his hand. According to the website personality test, the top career choices suited to his personality are computer software design, video game creation, and taxidermy. None appeal to him. Kind of exasperating, really, that he's expected to have his future completely mapped out at this point. Most people who became significant in their fields wound up transferring into that career through a fluke; few of them actually began there. And he still has so much to experience, so much to learn- how can he say that he definitely knows what he wants to do with the rest of his life?

One thing is for sure: he doesn't want any of his future to be spent with some clueless adult, if he can help it.

Racing for any answer that can conclude this meeting in the next few minutes, Dan's mind lands on that past weekend. It was late on Friday night, and he was grounded by Regan for ditching a school assembly to go to the public library earlier that week. Mr. and Mrs. Belden were away from the weekend, letting them take some time off from raising Bobby, for a change. The rest of the BWGs were out, and Trixie had begged Dan to watch Bobby for her. ("Since you won't be doing anything else tonight, after all? Please, Dan?")

Bobby was asleep on the couch, leading Dan to pick up the television remote and change the channel from Power Rangers Time Force. He flipped through the channels for several moments, and to his pleasant surprise, found a channel showing reruns of the 60's The Twilight Zone.

The episode he watched deeply resonated with him. Maybe it was because of his own encounters with death, and the prevalent reminders of his own mortality, but the story struck a chord far within him.

The concept revolved around a police officer, played by a young Robert Redford, being wounded outside of the door to a basement apartment. Its solitary occupant was a lonely old woman who was terrified to go outside or host any visitors for fear that Death might come for her. At the pleas of the wounded policeman, she relented and took him in to care for him.

While he recovered, the old woman revealed her fears of death, and the young policeman comforted her. At the end of the episode, it was discovered that the officer was Death, and that he wanted her to trust and accept him before taking her life. Now knowing that Death was not the monster she had imagined, old woman finally touched his hand, and accepted her fate. Then, hand in hand, she walked with Death out into the sunlight.

"You see? No shock. No engulfment," Death told her. "No tearing asunder. What you feared would come like an explosion is like a whisper. What you thought was the end is the beginning."

Dan lived through the abrupt death of his mother. He received the letter declaring his father missing in action while he was in foster

care. He knows his parents are dead, obviously.

Sometimes he imagines that his father is somehow still alive and waiting to take him home. It's a ridiculous, futile hope, but there's the faintest ghost of a chance. His father's body was never recovered, after all . . .

He does not like to imagine his parents dying. He tries not to wonder if Daniella Mangan saw her death speeding towards her and spent the last seconds of her life in terror. Dan refuses to dwell on the picture of his father, K. Timothy Mangan, malingering in agony and hopelessness, with full knowledge that his death was approaching.

But their deaths are reality. He is helpless to change that, and just as helpless to reverse how their deaths have changed him.

His parents have expired, and he cannot bring them back. But now he can think that their final moments of life were not protracted and horrifying, but serene and soft. They may have died, but Dan likes to think there was a reassuring and kindly young man present to lend guidance and comfort to them at their deaths. Someone to lead them into the sunlight.

It had been the last day of his eighth grade school year when his mother was killed. Dan arrived home, tossed his backpack on the floor, and relaxed on the couch with a copy of The Return of the King, one of his favorite books. Hours passed. Only when Dan heard a fist thumping at the front door did Dan notice that afternoon sun had been replaced by evening shadows.

He opened the door to find a Hispanic man and a dark-skinned woman waiting for him with somber expressions.

"Daniel Mangan?" The woman introduced herself and her partner, holding up a detective's badge. "I'm afraid we have some bad news."

He stared at them, not fully comprehending, as they explained that his mother was dead. The dusk shadows lengthened as they spoke, until he was fully engulfed by the night's darkness.

Back in the present, Dan Mangan looks his guidance counselor directly in the eye.

"I think," he says, somewhat surprised by the steadiness of his own voice, "that I might like to be a police officer."

\* \* \*

><p>"There was an old woman who lived in a room. And, like all of us, was frightened of the dark. But who discovered in a minute last fragment of her life that there was nothing in the dark that wasn't there when the lights were on. Object lesson for the more frightened amongst us, in or out, of the Twilight Zone."<p>

-The Twilight Zone, "Nothing in the Dark."

End

file.